

Humanity and Horses

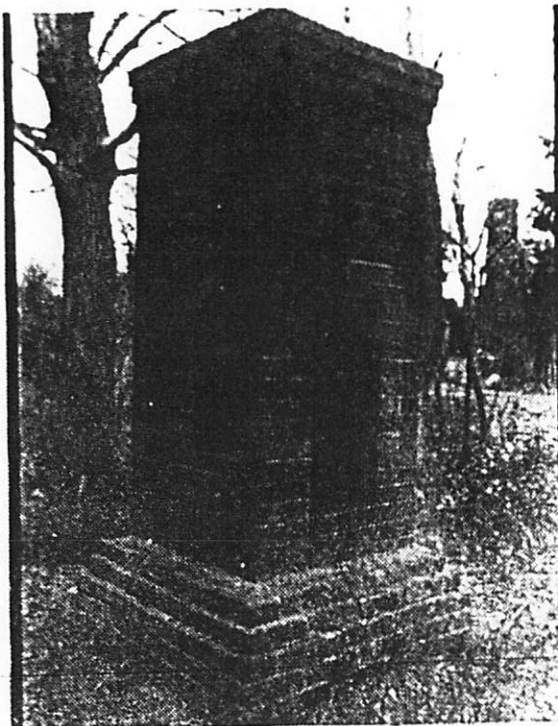
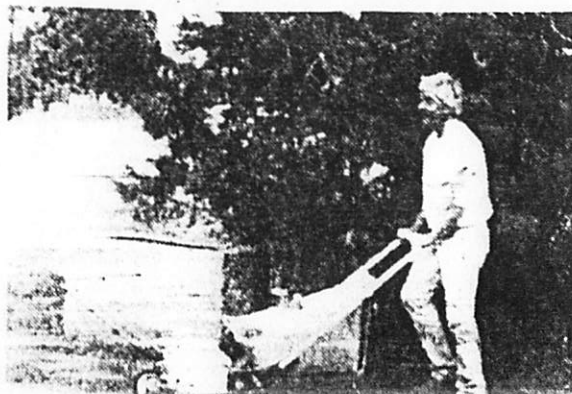
By the REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

"Did living intimately with animals and other of God's creatures make us a kinder gentler people 2 generations ago than we are today?"

I snapped my Welsh Corgi (Wendy) loose from her leash at the end of our regular morning walk and watched her as she trotted obediently back to our house. She is a beautiful animal and a great joy to Harriet and me in our retirement living. She is so poised and you might say "personally resourceful." She is perhaps 25% obedient, the other 75% is a compromise worked out through negotiation. I love to watch her romping and rolling on the lawn or braving the foaming waves which she loves to do on Duxbury Beach.

But as I set her loose one morning a few days ago something strange happened to me: I had a flashback to 70 years ago. I don't know for sure what triggered it, whether it was the releasing or the trotting, but there it was. (This is one of the fringe benefits of aging: you can't recall what you ate for lunch yesterday, but you are perfectly clear as I was this morning on something that took place 70 plus years ago.) The flashback was a similar releasing and trotting, this time not a little Welsh Corgi dog, but a horse, in fact 4 horses.

It was the winter of 1918 which had little snow but much below zero weather. It was so cold that water pipes allegedly below frost froze solid in many parts of town including those that provided water for our animal barn. It was that winter I am almost certain that froze Duxbury Bay so solid that my sister Betty (now in her 86th year) remembers driving a horse and sleigh to Clark's Island. Elden Wadsworth recalls that about this time boys at Powder Point School sailed out around Bug Light in crude ice boats.



The monument to the horse, "Honest Dick" off Powder Point Ave. bears this legend:

*"All are but parts of one stupendous whole
Whose body nature is, and God the soul."*
Here lies buried "Honest Dick" who faithfully served three generations. This noble horse was born upon Powder Point AD1817 -- here lived and died 1846.

fact that an earlier generation found itself living among other creatures and all forming "one stupendous whole" to whom they also owed an allegiance. Young people ask me what it was like to grow up in Duxbury 70 plus years ago and I think I have found the one salient difference from this mechanical and industrial age and that was the fact of common creaturehood which when recognized and obeyed served to humanize us.

People often comment as I have often, "Isn't this a great age when you can open the garage door, step into your car, turn the key and be on your way instead of cleaning, feeding, grooming and harnessing a horse?" I now have a rejoinder to that: "OK for that, but when did your car greet you with a whinny or a moo or even a meow as you opened the garage door?" Does the modern car owner ever know the gut level contentment of opening a barn door to a chorus of clucks from chickens, moos from cows and whinnying from the horses? When did your

Duxbury Clipper

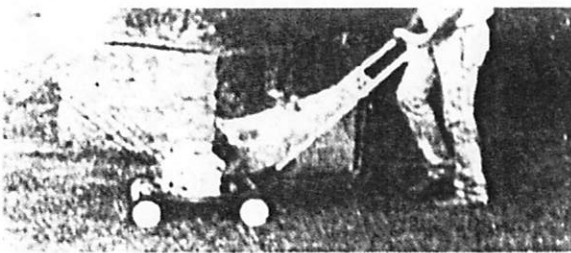
Section 2

Wednesday, May 17, 1989

usually chosen to pull the ice plow as we cut the squares on the ice pond preparatory to harvesting. We would change her regular steel shoe "calks" (i.e., metal plugs that fitted into the shoes) for ice cutters and she'd walk out onto the pond with her feet scattering ice chips as she went. I remember vividly one dawning day when I was lifted to her back to drive her and it was so cold I sat on my hands keeping them warm against her thick winter coat.

Not so companionable a friend was Ginger, trained as trotter and so named because of his hot temper. My father loved spirited horses, especially those others had been unable to "break." He was always glad to challenge other drivers on the way back from the railroad station where I had picked him up after a day of purchasing meat in Boston. I can't ever remember his being bested by any other horse on these runs. Ginger's most memorable contribution to our family lore was made late one afternoon when my brother Henry and I were bringing home 4/20-gallon cans of milk from Irving Peterson's farm in Green Harbor. As we rounded Millbrook corner (now sporting the only traffic light in Duxbury) we heard the 5:30 train leaving the Green Harbor station and we had a decision to make. Could we get down the hill and over the tracks before the locomotive belching out its smoke and sparks reached them? Knowing Ginger's speed capability we knew the answer as "yes" as we gave him the word and held the reins tight according to the custom of "trotters." Ginger was wearing blinders so he could not see right or left, only straight ahead. The only variable in this equation was the possibility of his looking around. Well, that is precisely what he did. He crossed the tracks splendidly but as we did so he looked around, saw this fire-breathing monster bearing down on him and made 2 gigantic leaps. The first threw 4 cans of milk out onto the street and the second tossed the wagon seat and its 2 passengers out as well and then abandoning his training as a trotter he galloped off into the dark.

Prince was a more tractable horse than Ginger, weighed perhaps half a ton more. He was paired with an even heavier mare we named Dolly. They distinguished themselves and made the minutes of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society by running away and side-swiping the horse watering trough we have mentioned, knocking it askew. The record according to Jack Post shows my father paid \$1.56 to have it set back to its proper place. My most vivid memory of Prince goes back to our weekly treks to supply the



Mowing the lawn at the Blue Fish River Park around the horse watering trough given by Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, 1890.

Deprived of water in our barn my father got permission from the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society to water our horses in the granite watering trough they had given the town in 1890. The trough stood then under the tall flagpole across from the old Cable Office at the north end of Washington St. Water was obtained in those frigid days by turning a long steel rod that reached down to a valve far beneath the ground. At first the horses were bridled and led out of our yard and down the hill past the No. 1 Fire Engine House across the Blue Fish River bridge to drink their morning allotment. We led them down and after they had drunk we snapped the bridle hitch and they trotted back to the barn. After a few trips we simply turned the horses loose from the barn and intelligent as they were they went out, took their morning drink and came back all by themselves to await harnessing to their butcher carts for their daily runs peddling meat about town. It was this releasing and trotting back to the barn that triggered this moment of memory.

This essay takes its origin in this flashback but centers around the question as to whether it was a "better" (i.e., more human) world when we lived intimately with animals. I will not try to answer the question but I will rather tell about 4 horses that dominated the lives of the 9 Merry children when the horses were the most frequent means of power and transportation on the farm and in the village and furnished a humanizing influence that made a real difference in life. I feel I am on solid ground when I describe the personalities of these horses writing for a Duxbury readership because Duxbury boasts one of the few monuments to horses that exist in our land. This monument standing 4 feet high and built of brick with a slate insert sits just off the junction of King Caesar Rd. and Powder Point Ave. on Bay Pond and bears this inscription:

"All are but parts of one stupendous whole whose body nature is and God the soul

"Here lies buried Honest Dick who faithfully served 3 generations. This noble horse was born on Powder Point in 1817: here lived and here died 1846."

It says something to this generation living today that a family would acknowledge its debt to an animal and thus recognize the enormous influence it had in moulding their lives. It impresses upon me the

idea of something being a horse?" I now have a rejoinder to that: "OK for that, but when did your car greet you with a whinny or a moo or even a meow as you opened the garage door?" Does the modern car owner ever know the gut level contentment of opening a barn door to a chorus of clucks from chickens, moos from cows and whinnying from the horses? When did your Chevrolet van call out "good morning" to you like this?

In 1918 my father's barn housed one cow, several chickens and a rooster, 3 cats, several bunny rabbits and 2 pigs in the basement and 5 horses. There was a stairway that led to the loft where the entire winter's supply of hay was stored on one side with chutes that funneled down to the horses' mangers on another side and the grain which we fed them on the other. Many homesteads had a family horse and cow and a vegetable garden out back featuring especially potatoes, beans and corn. A family in my first parish (Wiscasset, Maine) still hosted a family cow and my status as rector took a large leap upward when I milked it one day on a parish call.

It was a capital experience to open that barn door, and very hard work caring for all the animals, but there was a sense of kinship with the natural order of creation, a sense of comradeship with all creatures great and small. There was a dedication to a settled order of nature which man only upset at his peril. When a DHS senior expressed surprise that there were no organized sports at Partridge Academy when I first attended school there I explained that we not only had no time for sports; we didn't need them then, since all our energies were consumed in caring for the cows and pigs and chickens and horses. Living with animals as close comrades we never heard of vandalism and such a thing as a "sexual revolution" just could not happen. President Bush has talked about building a "kinder gentler nation," but how does the industrial economy produce this in contrast to a culture where life is a sharing with all the rest of the natural order? Knowing one's self to be related to all other creation with a mutual dependency has been a relatively inexpensive learning to live in peace. In my day of 70 years ago, things like calling the police to settle family disputes, abusing powerless children and creating homelessness for thousands of our people were almost unheard of. I am not saying the days our lives intertwined with lower orders of creation can be restored; I am merely reporting a climate of caring, an atmosphere of feeling responsible for others that was woven deep into the fabric of daily life. It is because our horses were so human and caring as well that I've chosen to describe them for the benefit of *Clipper* readers. Just who were these horses which trotted down to the watering trough those cold winter days in 1918.

First there was Molly, the placid one. It was she I chose for the weekly runs to the gunning stands on Duxbury Beach.

She was never disturbed by the fury of dogs barking on her way, or by the roaring of the waves as we approached High Pines, nor the shrieks of seagulls soaring past us. She was so sure-footed that she was

an even heavier mare we named Dolly. They distinguished themselves and made the minutes of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society by running away and side-swiping the horse watering trough we have mentioned, knocking it askew. The record according to Jack Post shows my father paid \$1.56 to have it set back to its proper place. My most vivid memory of Prince goes back to our weekly treks to supply the gunning stands near High Pines on Duxbury Beach. It was a very cold and windy trip and we were overjoyed when the custodian invited us into the shelter for a cup of cocoa and a donut. By the time we had drunk much cocoa and eaten several donuts, it had gotten dark outside and as we emerged to the lighted yard, Prince was nowhere to be seen.

My sister Ruth, who had come along for company, and I went back into the stand but there was nothing to do but to brave the cold wind and pick our way along the tops of the dunes from telephone pole to telephone pole (they lined the beach at that time) until stumbling and crawling, we reached the last one which we knew signaled Long Bridge. When we got home an hour or so later, we received no sympathy from father, whose only comment was, "Well, it is plain that that horse had more sense than you did."

Our most colorful horses by a wide margin was "Old Bess." She is appropriately memorialized in "The Duxbury Book" standing in the shafts of one of Duxbury's early fire engines. Appropriately because she was a real "fire horse." One ding dong from the fire bell at No. 1 fire engine house and she would begin to thrash about her stall, hacking great splinters from it sides. Harry Winslow, whose blacksmith shop stood across the Duxbury and Pembroke line in West Duxbury, used to lift her off the floor in a canvas sling with her toes barely touching the floor before he dared lift her feet for shoeing.

She was far from what you would call a "docile" animal and harnessing her into a sleigh on a day when a blizzard was raging outside to deliver a roast of beef to a customer on Surplus St., for example, could be quite an ordeal. Bridling her, harnessing her and hitching her onto a sleigh carried with it considerable personal risk. But as with most things we had found ways to circumvent her rebellious will. I did some research on that fantasy in song we enjoy singing at Christmastime called "Jingle Bells." I pointed out in an essay later in some detail what a travesty this song was of the facts as old Bess would exemplify. The actual experience of hitching a spirited horse onto a sleigh and driving out into the countryside is not exactly "O'er the fields we go" (what about those New England stone walls?). "Laughing all the way" (with ice particles cutting your cheeks wrapped up in a scarf?) and so on.

I recall one blizzard when I was asked to hitch her up and deliver a rib roast to a customer on Surplus St. My father as a retail meat dealer had his market in the north basement of our house just above Blue Fish River on Washington St. Our strategy with horses like old Bess was to slip the bridle over the right shoulder with an apple in hand, and in the left hand a

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15-inch piece of 2 by 4 held in front of you so you would not be crushed against the wall, as you approached her head. Bess would have been quite aware of the blizzard outside and well prepared for resistance.

Now armed with this 2 by 4, you slid alongside her, reaching far ahead with the apple and then deftly inserting the fit of the bridle into her teeth. Now watching your footwork so she wouldn't step on you with her 1,500 pounds of weight you would usher her out of the stall and put her harness on.

But your troubles were far from over; for now came the task of backing her into the sleigh shafts which she straddled half a dozen times till she gave in and was fastened tight. Now as you drove out of the yard and onto the street you were jerked unmercifully as the motion of the horse's legs was communicated to the sleigh, and holding the reins with freezing hands and braving the ice pellets that nicked your cheeks you were off. But now a mini-bombardment occurred as the horse's hoofs threw ice balls made by the hoofs onto your chest as you made your way along. There was no "laughing" to it.

This brief account will give a glimpse of what it was like living with animals. I have entitled this essay "Humanity and Horses" because I believe living with the mutual dependence between animals and human beings provided a "humanizing" atmosphere. To those who ask whether the age in which I grew up was "better" than this one I can only say that I believe that age was a more caring one, a more compassionate one. Alarms are sounding over the planet that we have given birth to a monster in our industrial age and our wildlife is telling us they can't live in poisoned ponds, polluted air, bulldozed wetlands not to mention the domestic violence in our homes with incest, rape, multiple murders a daily occurrence. It is as if we were living in a coal mine deep underground and the caged white mice are telling us we must change our ways.

**Newcomers****Membership**

New in town? Got the movin'-in blues? Give us a call and join us for coffee. We look forward to meeting you! Call Mary at 934-6132 or Linda at 585-5975.

Senior Tea

The senior tea held May 10 was a big success! Many Duxbury senior citizens enjoyed a wonderful lunch followed by a great performance from "Charisma." Thanks to all who helped to make this annual event so successful. Thanks also to Beginnings, the Sail Loft, the Studio, the Talbots, Westwinds, and Petals Flowers for their generous donations. Special thanks to Jacki Burke for the table decorations, Bob McCarthy, Vince Spiziri and Jerry Steinke.

Around Town

Andrew Lowe was one of 84 students who received degrees during Colby-Sawyer College's 151st commencement on May 13. Lowe is the daughter of Robert Lowe and Mrs. Karen Crichfield of Duxbury.

She received an associate in arts in science degree. While at Colby-Sawyer, Lowe was a member of the equestrian team.

Congressman Gerry Studds writes: "As far as I know, 950 meetings in 16 years is a Congressional record. After each of our Open Meetings this past weekend -- from Duxbury, where there was standing-room-only for spirited exchange about the Pilgrim

Acushnet, where we had a particularly enjoyable and wide-ranging chat with the 5 residents who

attended -- I left knowing that this is the part of my job I enjoy the most."

Just Moved In?

Moving's no fun, but you can beat the unpacking blues with a refreshing Welcome Wagon visit.

A phone call is all it takes to arrange my visit, and I have a basketful of good things for you. Gifts, helpful information and cards you can redeem for more gifts at businesses in the area. It's all free to you, and there's no obligation. Please call me soon.

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